THE SYRIAC VERSION OF GENESIS IV 1-16

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Introduction

In antiquity, the terseness of the biblical Cain-Abel narrative (Gen. iv 3-16) evoked curiosity, speculation and literary creativity based upon the many tantalizing details left explained by the Hebrew Bible: Why was Cain’s offering rejected, and how was this rejection conveyed to him? What is the precise meaning of God’s admonition and warning to Cain? What were Cain’s actual words to Abel? What was the full reason for Cain’s murdering his brother, and what was the actual method of homicide? How could Cain conceivably be hidden from God’s sight? What was the nature of the sign given to Cain? 1)

The Syriac version of this incident contains several surprising variants. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate that these variants, in concert constitute cumulative evidence of a narrative in which there are four protagonists: Cain and Abel, God and Satan.

The Peshitta deals in simple, undeveloped style, with motifs that are found in expanded form, in other literature. It is therefore, possible to reconstruct the relationship of the Syriac version to the New Testament and Hellenistic texts, to the Aramaic versions, and to polemical works wherein Cain and Abel evolve into the prototypes of the heretic and the saint 2).


2) As briefly summarized by Robert GORDIS, in the Universal Jewish Encyclopedia, II, p. 626. To the Hellenistic Jews, especially, the brothers became the archsymbol of the conflict between good and evil. Abel is the lover of godly righteousness

Vetus Testamentum, Vol. XXVI, Fasc. 1
Substantive Variants in the Syriac Version 3) (MT]S)

iv 5 "and his face fell"] "and his face darkened"

6 "and why has your face fallen?"] "and why has your face darkened?"

7 "there is lifting up"] "I receive"

7 "And unto you is its desire, but you can control it".]

"You shall turn to it (him?), and it (he?) shall control you".

8 —] "Let us descend into the valley".

8 "in the field"] "in the valley".

9 —] "therefore"

13 "My sin is too great to be borne"] "My sin is too great to be forgiven".

15 "Therefore"] "No. Thus . . ."

15 "a sign to Cain"] "a sign on Cain"

Analysis of the Variants

1. In the Hebrew Bible, Gen. iv 8 reads, "And Cain said (wayyō mer) to Abel; and it came to pass when they were in the field, that Cain rose up over Abel his brother, and killed him." Since the Hebrew 'mr ("said") is never synonymous with dbr ("spoke") 4), the apparent lacuna encompassing Cain’s statement to his brother has long been regarded as self-evident 5). And the biblical versions (Josephus, Antiquities, Book I, 2:1; Book of Adam and Eve, ii 1-15) whose faith made his sacrifice more acceptable than Cain’s (Heb. xi 4). Abel is the leader of all the martyrs in Sheol (Enoch XXXV 3-6), and the judge of all mortals in the other world (Testament of Abraham, recension A, ch. 13; recension B, ch. 11.) The innocent blood of Abel was never really absorbed by the earth (Apocalypse of Moses, 40), and so it retained for all time a magical efficacy. Abel’s blood is therefore invoked in maledictions found in the Syriac Cave of Treasures and the Ethiopic Book of Adam, and Jesus refers to “the blood of Abel the righteous” in his curse upon the Pharisees (Mt. xxiii 25). In gnostic literature, Abel is the prototype of the law-abiding man, and Cain represents evil (with one gnostic sect, called The Cainites, practicing complete antinomianism.) Cf. sources q. supra, note 1.

3) The Peshitta also contains several variants which are stylistic, rather than substantive.

4) Albert Ehrman, “What did Cain say to Abel?”, JQR LIII 1962-3, pp. 164-7 claims that the Hebrew ‘amar is a polaric verb meaning both to praise and diametric opposite, to despise.

5) Contrast S. E. Loewenstamm and J. Blau, Thesaurus of the Language of the Bible, Jerusalem 1957, p. xxx: “Sometimes a difficult passage is susceptible of explanation as it stands, and can only lose by emendation. It should not be supposed that the copyists omitted words which are so clear and so apparently necessary to the proper understanding of the text; and it seems more probable that we have here an archaic use of רחמים in the sense of רדביו "and he spoke", which needs no amplification".